

The Lock Busters

They've never met a padlock – or six-pin paracentric cylinder – they couldn't crack. Live, from the lock-picking championship of the world.

by Charles Graeber

For a lock picker, the world is a different place. Take, for example, a typical suburban house, with a bicycle in the front yard and a five-pin Weiser bolting the front door – a basic pin-and-tumbler lock, employed by millions of home owners.

When most people see that lock, they see security. But a lock picker sees a game. And maybe 15 seconds with a rake pick and a tension wrench. As for the bike Kryptonited to the railing out front? Please. Ten seconds, tops, with a Bic Round Stic ballpoint.

Or take a jewelry store on Main Street. The world sees the shatterproof Lexan windows and stone walls. Sure, you could melt the Lexan with a lighter or turn that wall into lava with a few strokes of a battery-powered thermal lance, but that's not fair, that's forced

entry. Besides, why bother when you can go through the door? The dimpled 437-rated high-security lock, the one Underwriters Laboratories considers a 20-minute pick job? A 12-year-old with a bump key could hack it in 20 seconds.

To understand how, drive two hours north of Amsterdam, to a small brick building in the Dutch village of Sneek. The Sneek Wigledam Youth Hostel appears to be nothing special, just bunk beds and a bar-and-breakfast space of unpainted wood and colorful furniture – something like an Ikea Gulag. But to a lock sports aficionado, this is Wimbledon.

It's 20 hours before the third annual Dutch Open lock-picking competition will begin, but the room is already packed with 50 or so men and women wielding burglar tools and representing the international steel bolt-hacker diaspora. By the kitchen you'll find Jean-Marie, a debonair French military "surreptitious entry" instructor in a black commando sweater, chatting with a lock enthusiast about his collection of Abloy disc tumblers. At the door is Barry Wels, the event's host and a coinventor of the Crypto-Phone. He's hacking an expensive, high-security, dimpled Mul-T-Lock using only a filed key and a steak knife handle. Behind the bar, a pair of locksmiths are speculating about which of the newbies is really an undercover cop. By the pool table, a gaggle of Dutch programmers probes the latches of a combination padlock with a broken tape measure, while behind them a German cyberpunk sells a hand-milled Kryptonite skeleton key to an American satellite engineer: 100 euros – cheap.

Standing above them all, with a beer stein in one hand and a cigarette in the other, is Arthur Bühl, a private dick from Hamburg and one of the most successful lock pickers of all time. Even in this crowded, smoky room, you can't miss him – he's the one standing 6'5" in snakeskin boots, with a kidney-length mullet cascading over the broad shoulders of his double-breasted zoot suit. Bühl's Fabio-the-Barbarian look stands out. So does his record. Although he's never won a Dutch Open, he's won most everywhere else, earning him Germany's ultimate lock-picking accolade: Master of the Universe.

"Arthurmeister!" booms Arthurmeister. Across the room, beer mugs chink at the cry of his name. The Master of the Universe ranking reflects his cumulative lock-picking score – it's a title that the lock sport commissioners bestow on the world points leader. If Bühl wants to keep it, he has to keep winning. Tomorrow, his sights will be set on toppling the current Dutch Open champion – a slight, mustachioed man in a T-shirt and acid-washed jeans named Julian Hardt. Back in Germany, Hardt works as a rainmaker, piloting his twin-prop to seed thunderheads with silver iodide.

"For me, a lock is an intellectual puzzle, like chess!" Julian the Champ yells in Bavarian-accented English. He yells because two men behind him have started pithing a steel safe with a cobalt-tipped drill. "But when you break a lock, when you crack that first puzzle, when you feel pins click and the cylinder go – it's like a drug," he continues. "So then you want to try a harder one!"

Arthurmeister throws an arm around Julian the Champ and laughs as only a Master of the Universe should. "*Ja*, life is good," he declares. "But tomorrow, you are mine."

Hardt smiles in concession. His eyes level at Arthurmeister's chest hair. "Arthur, tomorrow is tomorrow." Hardt says. "Why not have another beer today?"

"ARTHURMEISTER!" BOOMS ARTHURMEISTER. BEER MUGS CHINK AT THE CRY OF HIS NAME.

Mark Weber Tobias is the author of *Locks, Safes, and Security: An International Police Reference*, a two-volume, 1,400-page compendium referred to here as *De Bijbel*. Last summer, Tobias' report on how to use a ballpoint pen to hack tubular locks – locks with circular key interfaces, like those made by Kryptonite – made headlines coast to coast. Much to the company's horror, Tobias publicly ridiculed their bike lock as an overpriced horseshoe. "Those people are unbelievably arrogant," he says with a smirk. "I can't wait to break their next design and destroy that company."

Tobias shrugs off the notion that by publicizing the vulnerability, he's creating a crime wave. "People are just mad because they wasted 50 bucks," he says. "People trust their lives and safety to these locks. But most locks are garbage. Look around, they're easy to open. Not knowing that doesn't make you safer." Tobias rolls his eyes and waggles his head incredulously. "I mean, what do people want – security through ignorance? Wake up."

This rumpled 59-year-old ur-nerd isn't in Sneek to compete. He's staying in this "godawful miniature prison" to give a PowerPoint presentation ("Vulnerabilities of Master Key Systems") and to videotape the newest attacks against the latest locks. So he's perfectly happy to offer a few friendly tips to a fellow American who's new to the sport and struggling to learn the ropes.

"You're retarded," Tobias says, watching the neophyte wrestle with the pins. Tobias takes the lock and looks inside to make sure it isn't broken. It's fine. "I'll tell you how they teach it in covert-entry camp," he says, laying a hand on the poor picker's shoulder. "First, I stick you in a cage. Then I lock the door." Tobias straightens and smiles. "End of story. Trust me, it works," he says. "Death is a fantastic motivator."

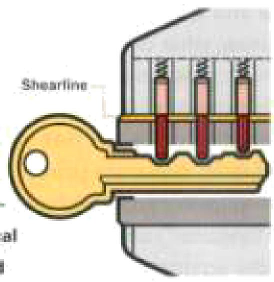
Diamond picks, snakes, rakes, combs, shallow picks, and handmade tension wrenches of black spring steel – the tools are readied for battle. It's 10 o'clock the next morning in the tournament hall. The competitors sit before their instruments.

The rules are old-school, head-to-head. Each person gets a different lock. Eight minutes to open your lock, then switch locks across the table and begin again for another eight. That's a round. At the end of each round, whoever has a shorter combined time is the winner. The rounds continue until it's only two, then one.

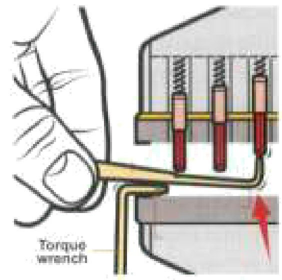
It's locksmith against space engineer, programmer against undercover cop, French commando against American college student. Julian the Champ, who grips the lock in one hand as he picks it with the other, dries his fingers on his pant leg and tries to remain calm. Arthurmeister prepares his vise. Amazingly, although last seen at 4 am manning the keg and shouting his own name, Arthurmeister is downstairs looking fresh

FOUR WAYS TO OPEN A LOCK

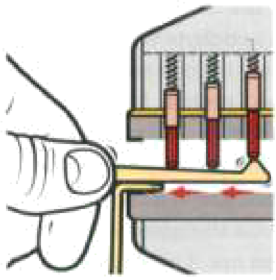
1. KEY ▸
The traditional method. Notice that the pins align along the shearline, allowing the cylindrical plug to turn and open the lock.



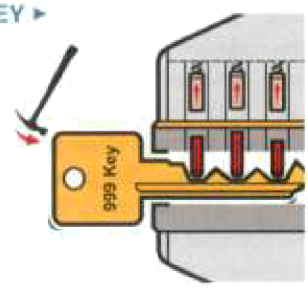
2. PICK ▸
With a torque wrench and a pick, the pins can be moved up manually.



3. RAKE ▸
With luck, the pins will open when swept with a rake. Torque on the wrench keeps the pins open after they catch.



4. BUMP KEY ▸
Tap a specially cut key, and the pins pop apart.




Arthur Bühl, the Dutch Open lock-picking champion.

in a double-breasted suit and vest, a key insignia on his red silk tie. His meaty hands are shaking and his eyes are bloodshot, but the Master of the Universe is ready to rock.

"Three, two, one, go!" The pickers grab their tools and begin. Most combine the tension wrench with a rake – a tool with multiple heads that can be dragged quickly over all the pins at once. As they work, they stare down at the table or into space. They're visualizing, using the pick like a catfish uses its whiskers, mapping the dark recesses by feel. It's a cold hard world inside the keyway. There are special pins, mushrooms, telescopes, wedges. Pins designed to foil people, pins that don't cooperate. And always, there's the pressure of the clock.

"This isn't pressure," Tobias says. "Try real-world covert entry. Either you pick the lock fast or you get shot or arrested. End of story."

"Open!" says Julian the Champ.

"Open!" yells Arthurmeister.

Round after round, the competitors fall away, until finally, inevitably, only these two remain. They sit down across from each other at a table. The spectators and fallen competitors gather around.

A lock is placed in front of the Champ. He scoops it up and squints into its mysterious darkness. It's a Lips 8042C, a five-pin cylinder with a straight keyway. It's tough, but fair.

Arthurmeister receives its sister lock, the Lips 8362C. It's a six-pin high-security model. Several of the pins are mushroom-shaped. Working them with a pick is difficult, made all the more so by the keyhole. It's paracentric, shaped something like a thalidomide lightening bolt, and expressly designed to hinder the motion of a picker's tools. In technical terms, the 8362C is a bitch.

Arthurmeister stubs out his cigarette and tightens the demon lock in his vise. Then he rubs his hands and leans over his challenge like a hungry giant. Go! The opponents wedge in their tension wrenches and begin.

Not much is happening at the tables. It's like watching a chess match, only without the chessboard. But to a knowledgeable lock picker, this is an epic showdown. "Intense!" whispers Tobias.

Hardt works his picks in his cupped hand as if he's applying lipstick to a hand puppet. Arthurmeister scrapes away at the monster in his vise like a dentist on Benzedrine. The tools of the trade look like toothpicks in his oversize mitts.

"Open!" cries Arthurmeister. He smooths his plumage back and sits upright in his throne, triumphant.

The other lock pickers gasp. Someone claps. Arthurmeister has picked the 8362C in only 20 seconds. It was a rake pick on a supertough lock, an opening that uses luck almost as much as skill.

Meanwhile, Julian the Champ can't pick his lock at all. The clock runs out at eight minutes.

Julian looks up through his tangled eyebrows. "Oh, Arthur," he sighs. He sucks his teeth and grimaces like a beaver. They switch locks. The Champ has to beat Arthurmeister's time or he loses. It's almost impossible. Julian works at the 8362C intensely, but 20 seconds is not time enough. It's over. He stands, defeated. His opponent inhales him in a bear hug.

The crowd claps and hoots. "Arthurmeister!" they yell.

"Beer!" Arthurmeister booms back. The Master of the Universe lopes to the bar to celebrate, more, again. And a new Dutch Open champion is born. ■ ■ ■

Charles Graeber (charlesgraeber@aol.com) *wrote about the car subculture of drifting in issue 11.10.*